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ABSTRACT

The document presents a history of an Italian immigrant family that settled in Westport, Connecticut, before 1900. The monograph is part of a project to investigate the ethnically varied cultural heritage of the Norwalk-Westport area. Objectives of the history are to record the story of the d'Amico family, shed light on the Westport Italian community, and to assess the impact of the Italian ethnic group on local culture. The document is presented in five major sections. Section I introduces the history. Section II provides background information on Westport in 1900. Section III portrays the D'Amico family, chronicles Augostino D'Amico's immigration from Italy in the early 1880s, describes various jobs held by Augostino and his son in the United States, traces the D'Amicos' move to and settlement in Westport, and records successes and defeats of the D'Amico family in the Westport area until the 1970s. Section IV investigates prejudice and discrimination against immigrants throughout American history and stresses the desire of immigrants to be accepted into the mainstream of American life. The final section assesses the effects of social change on the integration of Italian immigrants and persons of Italian extraction into Westport society. (DB)

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ITALIANS IN WESTPORT

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

FOR

AN ETHNOHISTORY OF THE WESTPORT-NORWALK AREA FROM 1900 TO TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times American immigration has become a field of special interest to scholars and writers. Much has been written on the waves of immigrants who landed on our shores; with accounts depicting them in an environment that was totally new, strange and sometimes hostile. The forces that impelled them from their homeland were at times common and unique. Their personal experiences would also be as similar as they were dissimilar. Yet, collectively, they would leave an indelible imprint on American culture.

Who were these immigrants? Where did they come from? Why did they come? What happened to them after they arrived? Immigration, as most people know and talk about it, is usually thought of in terms of the large waves of ethnics who came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; probably because they came in such large numbers and significantly altered American society. A more accurate perspective, however, would be that of John F. Kennedy's when he described America as a nation of immigrants; a view that reflects the melting pot concept of America as well as its entire ethnic diversity.

But what of immigration in our own backyard. Is it a viable concept today? Are its remnants still visible? The following personal account is an attempt to reveal the story of an Italian immigrant family that migrated to Westport before the turn of the century and eventually established permanent roots in the community. Its purpose is not solely a human interest story, but rather to shed light on an Italian community that emerged in Saugatuck around the turn of the century and its impact on local culture.

CHARACTER OF WESTPORT

At the close of the 19th century Westport, like other Connecticut cities and towns, saw the emergence of a thriving Italian community. Just a decade earlier, in 1890, 5,000 Italian immigrants were reported living in the state.[1] Italians first arrived in Westport in the 1880's and a steady influx continued for the next three decades.[2] At this time Westport was a rural community with a population of about 4,000[3], most of whom were old stock Americans from northern Europe. Fifty years earlier the New York-New Haven Railroad between Westport and Norwalk had been completed (December 25, 1848), and no connecting road existed between Westport and Saugatuck. During this period,

> What is now Riverside Avenue, stopped at about where the gate to Kemper's Factory is now located [more recently Nash's Warehouse]. Here was a pair of bars which opened into a piece of woodland, and during the building of the railroad, a footpath was worn along through the trees near the river to the place where the west abutment of the railroad bridge was built. Shortly after the town opened a wagon path nearly where the present avenue is and then Saugatuck began to boom....[4]

In the 1840's some Irish families settled in Saugatuck;[5] they would, however, be engulfed by the large number of Italian immigrants who would come later.

Farming was an important part of Connecticut economic life, and Westport shared in this lucrative business.[6] In 1903 the local paper commented on the "...increasingly important industry of fruit growing, which has become one of the most profitable branches of Connecticut farming."[7] Although many of the new immigrants found employment on area vegetable and fruit farms, others turned to the railroad and local factories.[8] Nationally there was a demand for unskilled labor, in both industry and farming, which immigrants could provide. Westport, in spite

of its size, had its needs; and for those who chose to go beyond the large urban centers, the town drew a sizable number of foreign-born, including a substantial number of Italians, as did its neighboring communities.[9]

AN ITALIAN IMMIGRANT IN WESTPORT

Like many other immigrants who came to Westport, my grandfather, Augostino D'Amico (1866-1941), left his homeland for America "to work, to make a better living." He hailed from a small farming village about 200 miles southeast of Rome called Iesli (Yilsi), located in the province of Abruzzi.[10] Most Italians (85%) who emigrated to America came from the southern regions of the country.[11] Economic conditions (especially agricultural) were strong reasons for leaving; however, the lure of adventure and travel probably influenced my grandfather, since he was a young man of about 16 when he ventured to America. On his first trip across the Atlantic, in the early 1880's, he was accompanied by his Godfather who was to serve as his guardian. Disembarkation took place at Naples. His ship accommodations were steerage (or 3rd class) and it took twelve days to cross the ocean. After landing at the docks in New York City, he was then ferried over to Ellis Island for processing.[12] How and why he came to Connecticut reflected a common practice carried on by many others who came; immigrants would usually seek out relatives or paesani (people from the same village),[13] and with him the latter case is true. Augustino had a short stay in New Rochelle, New York, where he lived with friends before coming to Saugatuck. The latter, previously an Irish enclave, was being rapidly transformed into a predominantly Italian community. Some immigrants, however, may have first come to Westport to work in the onion fields; for during the height of this industry a lot of immigrant labor was brought in from New York and housed by employers.[14]

His immediate concern was housing and employment. Work was difficult to find; probably due to the language barrier and consequently was detained by local authorities for a few days and then released.[15] Stringent laws on vagrancy were in force, and there was always a constant vigilance for vagrants.[16] Unemployed and unknown immigrants could be viewed with a jaundiced eye by New England natives who were being invaded by an ilk that many found totally repugnant.[17] He eventually found employment with the New York-New Haven Railroad working nine and ten hours a day tempering railroad ties for new track, and lived in quarters provided by the railroad to house track crews - they were shanties. Railroad work would be his main occupation for the next thirty years; and until his retirement in 1914 at age 48.

Many immigrants who came to America had no intention of remaining permanently. It was only seasonal employment, returning to their homeland periodically to visit family and friends. Initially, this may have been the case with my grandfather, for he frequently shuttled back and forth to Italy, crossing the Atlantic a total of nineteen times before his death. An average stay in Italy would be about one year. Sometime in the 1890's he must have decided on permanent residence, since he became an American citizen in 1897. Approximately five years earlier he married, and probably hoped to bring his wife with him at some future time. The money he earned in America was invested in a 42-acre farm located in a small town close to his place of birth, which he left to his wife and father to maintain in his absence.

When not doing railroad work, Augostino worked locally at various odd jobs - gardening, masonry and maintenance. Many immigrants worked on private estates.[18] In 1912 he took a job working on a large private estate called Longshore that was owned by F.E. Lewis. The latter employed about twenty laborers, mostly all immigrants, some of whom were Italian and resided in Saugatuck. They worked in the onion fields, did gardening

and general maintenance and even cared for sheep; all of which my grandfather labored at, including the care of two bears, two lions and two tigers. He received $1.25 per day. A multi-faceted man, at times he would work as a stone mason, a skill he learned while in Italy. Through his experience with the Railroad, he was able to secure a job with the Connecticut Railway Company in 1913 tempering and laying ties for the new trolley lines. He worked on the Main Street, Riverside Avenue, Bridge Street and Compo Beach lines. Transportation to and from work was almost non-existent for most immigrants. They would rise early and walk to their job, some walking long distances such as Saugatuck to South Norwalk. Only a few could afford a trolley ride or owned a horse.[19]

As the Italian community emerged many became prosperous establishing their own businesses. In 1903, for example, ads appeared frequently by fruit and vegetable merchants, grocers and boot and shoe craftsman, with a few located on Main Street.[20] And by 1918 the city directory was listing Italians in a multitude of different occupations, as diffusion and amalgamation was slowly taking place. Occupations were listed as follows:

bartender	variety store
gardener	florist
laborer	5 & 10¢ store
fruit and confectionery	boot and shoe repair
farmer	grocery and market
tailor	factory worker
chauffeur	watchman
clerk	teamer
conductor	liquor store
barber	hatter
mason	carpenter
trackman	mechanic[21]

As one can gather from the above data, Italians are versatile people, in addition to being hard workers with a desire to better their plight; and as business men intuitive, perceptive and shrewd. Close to the soil, they purchased land whenever money and opportunity were at hand; not to mention how perspicacious their investments would later prove to be.

Many immigrants succeeded in later bringing their entire families to America, but my grandfather did not. His wife refused to make the move, dying prematurely at age 30 in 1907. Earlier they had lost three of their four children at a young age, leaving only a son, Anthony, who Augustino brought to Westport in 1912.[22] It now seemed to add a larger degree of permanence to this new homeland.

Anthony, my father, was twelve years old when he arrived in Westport. While processing at Ellis Island, which took most of the day, he vividly recalls how one of the judges asked his father, "What are you going to do with the boy?" His father replied, "I am going to send him to school." And send him to school he did. After taking up residence on Saugatuck Avenue his father enrolled him in the Bridge Street School. He started in the third grade and stayed for about two years. His teachers were Miss Adams and Miss Coyle who schooled him in reading, writing and arithmetic. He was quickly learning English, and frequently other students would help him interpret; for there were other Italian students attending from Saugatuck, many of whom were native born, yet had the facility to understand and speak both languages. However, his education in American was short-lived, after two years he went out to work. When I asked my father why they decided to settle in Saugatuck, he simply replied, "Because the rent was cheaper and my father took me there."[23]

While attending school, he got his first job through his father working summers weeding the onion fields on the F.E. Lewis estate. He worked an average of nine to ten hours

each day and was paid at the rate of $.05 per hour. Across the street from the Longshore entrance, on Steven Wakeman's farm, Anthony picked strawberries and was paid $.02 per quart picked. An average of forty people, approximately half of whom were immigrants of ethnic diversity, worked in these strawberry patches with him. In 1914, after leaving school, he again found employment through his father while the latter was laying new trolley lines in Westport. Anthony became a waterboy on the Main Street trolley line. Remaining only a short time, he secured a job at the Norwalk Rubber Tire Company working on tire linings and receiving $5.50 per day. It lasted only one year after which he experienced a period of few jobs and some unemployment.[24]

By 1917 America had entered the war in Europe and local boys were being recruited. Anthony was still living in Saugatuck with his father when he expressed a desire to join the Home Guards. He remembers his father giving a stern rebuke and admonishing, "If you join the Home Guards don't bother to come home." He drilled for two nights on the third floor of the Fairfield Furniture building before he was disqualified for lying about his age - he was only seventeen years old and you had to be eighteen to qualify.[25]

Sometime after applying for admission to the Home Guards, Anthony worked on the E.T. Bedford estate located off Greens Farms Road. It was only seasonal employment weeding onions with about fifty immigrants of varying ethnic backgrounds, a large number of Polish extraction. He described Mr. Bedford, a well-known philanthropist, as good hearted, kind and gentle, and who frequently worked "side-by-side" with the rest of the workers - referring to him as a "regular guy."[26]

Although much of his employment over the years pertained to gardening, farm work and maintenance, he did experience factory work. For a period of two years he was employed at the Lees Manufacturing Company in the Richmondville Avenue area of Westport. The company manufactured bleaches, twines, cords, wicks and yarns and employed a substantial number of Italian

immigrants over the years. They worked as machine operators, dyers, mill hands and shipping clerks.[27] Anthony carried spools of thread and string to the machine operators. Nationally, working hours and days were slowly changing; especially after the passage of the Adamson Act in 1916 establishing the eight hour day. He now worked only an eight hour day and five and a half days per week.[28]

For the next seven years Anthony lived in New Haven where he owned and operated a Boot Black and Manicurist Parlor; then, returned to live with his father for a short time before sailing to Italy where he was married in 1923. Planning to bring his new bride to America, he encountered difficulty due to new legislation recently passed by the United States government. Consequently, not knowing when passage could be secured, he returned alone. Two years later, after appealing to the Superior Court in Bridgeport for entry papers and arranging for her passage, she landed at Ellis Island. When asked by officials, "Do you want to return to Italy?" She answered, as instructed by friends, "It's up to my husband. It depends on his disposition." Anthony , waiting for his wife to complete processing, was asked how he could support her. He replied confidently, "If somebody else can support his wife on $22 a week, I can too."[29]

After a brief stay in New Haven, they moved to Saugatuck where they lived with relatives before taking up permanent residence. Through friends and relatives he found employment; first as a gardener on the Cockroft estate in Saugatuck and then as a laborer with a Greenwich contractor. These jobs were temporary and in 1929 he found himself unemployed. He sought work by offering gardening services to local estate owners and succeeded in obtaining a job on the Arnold Schlaet estate located at Compo Point in Westport. Mr. Schlaet employed a small group of Italian immigrants, some of whom my father

had gotten the job for. It was quite common for those in the Italian community to find jobs for their friends. In many instances an employer would inquire about additional manpower and they would bring their friends.[30]

These were tough times, since the countries worse depression had stagnated the nation. It was 1931 and unemployment was rampant. My father recalls knocking on doors for work. Fortunately, he was hired by a local electrical contractor who quickly recognized his potential as a foreman. Shortly after the company was awarded a contract to renovate an old barn that would be the new Westport County Playhouse. As foreman, Anthony supervised eighty-five men on the project, many of whom were immigrants. It took about thirty days to complete the remodeling, after which he again sought work; going as far as New York City for temporary employment.[31]

As the depression deepened, job prospects appeared bleak. However, with Franklin Roosevelt's election to the presidency, New Deal legislation created jobs for the hard-core unemployed. Under the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) Anthony secured a position with the town maintenance department. He worked with approximately fifty other immigrants (including many Italians) widening and building stonewalls on Stoney Brook Road, and constructing stonewalls along Riverside Avenue (in front of the Bedford Junior High School) and at the Compo yacht basin. He received $35 a week. His classification was mason tender which entitled him to $5 more per week. After enjoying about two years of steady employment, he returned to a precarious odd job existence for another ten years when he began employment (in 1948) with the E.I. duPont deNemours Company of Fairfield. He worked in a number of different capacities until pension retirement in 1965.[32]

In 1936 he decided to move his family (wife and eight children) from Saugatuck to the north side of Westport in the Richmondville Avenue area. Here, three more children would be born and the family would remain for thirty years.[33] It was characteristic of many Italian families to later move out of

Saugatuck; albeit, some stayed. Those who moved did so for a variety of different reasons; a few of which may have been a better home with more land, a desire to escape an ethnic community with all its accompanying stigma and become part of the main stream of American culture (usually second generation), the transformation of the area from what previously had been almost an entire residential community to a more commercial environment, and the upward mobility of those who had improved their economic and social position - a story that is a unique part of American history.

PREJUDICE, DISCRIMINATION AND ACCEPTANCE

To say that Italians in Westport escaped the forces of discrimination and prejudice would not be an accurate assessment; however smooth the transition from immigrant status to full-fledged citizen may have appeared. Nativism in New England did not always epitomize an overt castigation such as the diatribes of Madison Grant in The Passing of the Great Race.[34] The tenor of times was clearly reflected in the newspapers of the day as they depicted Italians in the darkest hues whenever guilt or suspicion prevailed. One local paper described how "... an Italian, was brought before Judge Smith, this morning charged with assault upon another Italian. He plead guilty and fined. The total costs were $18.06, which he paid."[35] And, still another account linking Italians in Saugatuck to the burglarizing of local buildings based on "the theory that a number of young men of the Italian section, in Saugatuck are responsible, has been advanced by many but nothing definite is known at present writing."[36] It was not just individuals who bore the brunt of that stigma, but the entire Italian community. While at the Bridge Street school my father clearly remembers the scathing ethnic attacks on him - dago, guinea, wop, which he would also experience later in adult life.[37] Unfortunately, it was

characteristic of a subcurrent of adverse feelings that frequently pervaded American life.

There were instances when not only prejudice but fears seemed to have gripped the local populace regarding the numbers of foreign-born coming into the area. In the neighboring town of New Canaan, concern over their increased numbers prompted the local paper to editorialize on the problem: "Population in New Canaan is now two Americans to one foreigner. Foreigners are more prolific ... population will be substantially altered in the next decade. Probably the problem will not be what to do with them but what they will do to us ... Plans should be made to assimilate ... Children receive good schooling but little else is done along the lines of citizenship and good training."[38]

To ignore the positive efforts that were made by natives to grapple with the problems of assimilation and the fair and humane treatment received from many of their numbers would be unjust. My father spoke frequently of the kind treatment he had experienced;[39] but by the time he reached maturity Italians were deeply entrenched here and a change in attitude had already begun. The quotation above taken from the New Canaan Messenger is indicative of this change in sentiment. Some natives even went so far as to help immigrants gain passage to America as did the First Selectman of Westport, Austin Wakeman, in "...endeavoring to have ... a former Saugatuck resident included in the next quota of Italian immigrants to America."[40] However, a genuine propinquity would not occur for Italians until much later.

A COMMUNITY WITHIN A COMMUNITY

It was not long after arrival that Italians began to organize their people into fraternal and social clubs; some of which were a part of religious life. The Catholic Church of Assumption, established by the Irish only a few decades before

the Italians arrived, filled the religious needs of these new immigrants; however, as their ranks swelled, the need for a larger church became apparent, and in 1900 the current facility on Riverside Avenue was built. They quickly became immersed in church affairs. The St. Anthony of Padua feast, celebrated every June 13 for approximately two days, was an ongoing affair until recent times. The celebration consisted of carrying a statue of St. Anthony, in procession, from Saugatuck to Assumption Church and back. After religious ceremonies, a carnival took place on Franklin Street and adjacent roads. The festival attracted large crowds of townspeople, especially the last night when a large display of fireworks were exploded.[41] My parents were more a part of this culture when they resided in that community; once they left, however, those ties began to disappear. Yet friendships were retained over the years, but it seemed only at a distance.

The Sons of Italy, an organization formed early in their arrival,[42] not only helped sponsor social events, but were actively involved in community affairs such as holiday and church celebrations.[43] It should be noted that not all Italians participated in these organizations (my grandfather and father included), and spurned any affiliation with them. Yet that is not to say that they were not interested in other social affairs. The Italian shows which were popular events within their own community were attended by many. My father and mother expecially remember attending the shows of the 1940's and 1950's in Norwalk and Stamford. The latter cities had a much larger Italian community whose social organizations would arrange for local shows; probably because they could draw the necessary numbers for the performance. Italians in Westport were informed of these shows through friends or relatives, with whom they generally attended. The shows consisted mainly of plays and musical performances, in most of which Italian was spoken throughout with the exception of a few American phrases interjected from time to time. The performers were mainly Italian-Americans, some of whom were known nationally in Italian

circles. Shows would last about three hours. A few shows were offered each year, but it varied; and club halls or school auditoriums were used for performances.[44]

A FADING IMAGE

In Saugatuck today we see only remnants of what was once a solid phalanx of Italian families. That distinct quality of life that pervaded the entire community seems all but lost with growth and change. Yet their customs and traditions prevail.

The story of my family represents a typical experience of many early Italian settlers who came to Westport; where they worked and resided, the difficulties encountered trying to find employment and the precarious existence they maintained in endeavoring to establish themselves in a new environment. What is significant, however, is the transition that has taken place over the decades. At first treated by their American brethen with disdain and suspicion, they suceeded in becoming solid and respected citizens - a status not easily achieved.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Harold J. Bingham, Ph.D., History of Connecticut (4 vols.; New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1962), II, 711.

[2]... And There Was Light: The Story of Religious Communities in Westport and Weston (Westport: Published by the Church Women United and The Ecumenical Education Committee Westport and Weston, Connecticut, 1976), pp. 17,18. An abbreviated form of the title will be used for all references hereafter.

[3]Connecticut State Register and Manual, prepared by the Secretary of State (Hartford: State of Connecticut, 1978), pp. 608,609.

[4]Westporter-Herald, January 20, 1903.

[5]... And There Was Light, p. 16.

[6]Wakefield Dort, (ed.), Westport in Connecticut History 1835-1935 (Bridgeport: Warner Bros. Co., 1935), p. 27.

[7]Westporter-Herald, January 9, 1903.

[8]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-9; Renzulli Tapes, May 13, 1975, Westport Historical Society; Nappa Tape, November 13, 1975, Westport Historical Society; ... And There Was Light, pp. 17,18.

[9]"Italo-Americans in New Canaan," The New Canaan Historical Society Annual, VIII (1975), 28-32. Hereafter only the title of the article will be cited for future references.

[10]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[11]Patricia Snyder Weibust, Gennaro Capobianco, and Sally Innis Gould, The Italians: In Their Homeland, in America, in Connecticut (Storrs: University of Connecticut, 1976), p. 60.

[12]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[13]Weibust, The Italians, p. 60.

[14]Dort, Westport in Connecticut History 1835-1935, pp. 27,28

[15]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79

[16]Ibid.; Westporter-Herald, January, 1903.

[17]Weibust, The Italians, p. 62.

[18]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79; Renzulli Tape, April 22, 1975, Westport Historical Society.

[19]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[20]Westporter-Herald, January, 1903.

[21]The Westport, Saugatuck and Greens Farms Directory 1917-1918 (Rhode Island: C. DeWitt White Co., 1917), pp. 33-84.

[22]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]This writer has vivid memories of the company and its employees, since he resided in the Richmondville Avenue area close to thirty years, knowing many of these immigrants who had given long service to the company.

[28]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Alexander DeConde, Half Bitter Half Sweet: An Excursion into Italian-American History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 103; For an excellent account of nativism see John Higham, Strangers in The Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

[35]Westporter-Herald, January 2, 1903.

[36]Ibid., January 26, 1917.

[37]Interviews with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[38]"Italo-Americans in New Canaan," p. 29, quoting the New Canaan Messenger, February 13, 1909.

[39]Interview with Anthony R. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.

[40]Westporter-Herald, May 26, 1922.

[41]... And There Was Light, pp. 17, 18.

[42]The Westport, Saugatuck and Greens Farms Directory, 1917-1918, p. 31.

[43]Interviews with Anthony R. and Mary C. D'Amico, December-January, 1978-79.